

Comments of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Manhattan Beach 2025 Forum
Climate Champion Award
March 26, 2014

It's an honor to accept this award from the City of Manhattan Beach and South Bay 350 Climate Action Group.

I want to begin by thanking Bill McKibben, the founder of 350.org, and Mayor Amy Howorth for their roles in today's event – and especially for their long leadership on climate.

I'm being honored for my accomplishments in Congress, so I thought I'd take this opportunity to share some thoughts about my forty years in Congress.

It's so easy today for people to be negative about politicians ... electoral politics ... and government. They see a gridlocked Congress, vicious political attack ads, and halting progress on climate change.

I can get discouraged too.

But then I remind myself that it's never been easy to pass legislation. Government can be a tremendous force for good in people's lives. But it takes commitment and perseverance to pass major legislation.

A good example is the Clean Air Act. I worked for nearly a decade to pass the 1990 Amendments to the Clean Air Act. In the early years of the 1980s, the law was under attack from President Reagan, who made an alliance with John Dingell, who was the Democratic chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. We fought back those efforts and then started year after year working to build support for a stronger bill.

It took years, but when our moment came in 1989 and 1990, we passed a law that was much stronger than any bill we had proposed even the Congress before. The 1990 law was landmark legislation that established programs to address the problems of urban smog, hazardous air pollution, acid rain, and the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer. It has been called the most effective environmental law ever written.

I am proud of what the law has accomplished. Key air pollutants have been reduced by two-thirds while the economy has more than tripled in size. The law has had a huge impact throughout the country. Fewer missed school days. Fewer missed work days. Decreased death and sickness.

Over my career, I have similar experiences on so many issues. It took 15 years from the day the tobacco executives testified that nicotine is not addictive to pass the law giving FDA jurisdiction over tobacco products. It took my whole career to pass a law guaranteeing health coverage to all Americans.

In the environmental area, I worked on three different revisions of the Safe Drinking Water Act, each one strengthening the law. Today, 95% of the U.S. population receives their drinking water from systems meeting all health-based drinking water standards.

It took years, but I worked to enact laws to protect children from lead poisoning. One law got lead out of drinking water ... another got lead out of water coolers ... another set standards for safe renovations in homes with lead paint ... and yet another removed lead from toys used by young children.

In retrospect, these actions may seem commonsense. But just like today, it was hard to make progress. It was hard to clean up the air, clean up the water, and reduce exposure to lead. The special interests fought us every step of the way. It took dedicated public servants and a supportive public to get the job done.

Now we may face the biggest challenge of all: climate change.

I am optimistic about what we can do to address climate change. Congress is not going to be part of the solution for a while. Unfortunately, the Republicans who run the House don't even acknowledge the science. But the good news is that President Obama does not need Congress to act. He has broad authority under the Clean Air Act and other laws to act on his own. And I believe he is committed to acting.

But he will need support from communities across the country. And that's why I'm so proud of the leadership California is demonstrating in the fight on climate change. Like so many times before, California is confronting its challenges and as a result is leading the nation.

That vision is on display today in Manhattan Beach. The Manhattan Beach 2025 vision lays out a shining goal of transitioning from fossil fuels to 100% renewable energy.

I'd like to commend the elected officials, community and business leaders and the many citizens who are working together to craft this vision. Your work will serve as a model for other cities to follow. You are proving the economic case ... the public health case ... and the environmental case.

I congratulate you on your work and wish you success. When you demonstrate success, other cities will jump to follow in your footsteps.

And that makes me especially honored to be receiving this award. I am grateful for the recognition you have given me ... and even more so for all the crucial work you are doing to protect our environment for our children and grandchildren.